

# Vaginal Accessibility:

## Towards a Typology of Female Characters in Literature

by  
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When contemplating the recurring images of women in literature, we are tempted to turn to that form of literature in which characters appear as types. A fecund source of such character-types is comic drama and, in particular, popular comedy. In the repeated, and often stereotyped, roles of the commedia dell'arte in fifteenth and sixteenth century Italy, we find that the female characters, as well as the better-known male roles (Harlequin, Pierrot and Pantalone), constitute a range of stereotypes which forms a framework within which we can see the images of women in literature as a whole.

There are three basic types of women in the commedia dell'arte.<sup>1</sup> The first is a refined lover, the inamorata, who is educated, quotes poetry and is of noble birth; the second figure is not at all refined: she is the servetta-birichina, an artful servant maid whose lewd antics with the male servants burlesque the artifices of the inamorata; the third is a shrew. Before exploring the nature of these types to discover their relevance to later images of women in literature, we should note that all these women are seen through the eyes of men. The improvisators of these plays are



creating repetitive plots which illustrate the ways in which women relate to men. As helpers, lovers, soul-mates, destroyers, women are serving or thwarting the needs of men; they are seen as either providing love and sexual satisfaction or denying both; they are either physically accessible for intercourse or they remain aloof.

First, then, let us look at the different kinds of refined lovers we find in literature. When doing so, it is helpful to think in terms of vaginal accessibility. The most inaccessible refined woman that a man loves is his goddess. In mediaeval terms this figure is the Virgin Mary whom the supplicant adores for her ability to help him enter the gates of Heaven.

It may seem strange to include the Virgin Mary in an examination of any lover figure, refined or otherwise. Yet, in perusing the lyrics addressed to the Virgin in the fourteenth century, we find the imagery often physical in nature, as if the poet were fascinated by Mary's sexual inaccessibility. A good example is "Ave Maris Stella:"

Hail Mary, star of the sea!  
God's mother, blessed thou be,  
For ever in holy virgin state  
To Heaven thou art the blessed  
gate.<sup>2</sup>

Here Mary is addressed as both mother and virgin, an eternal paradox that understandably fascinates the poet. Further, though, he imagines her to be

the way to heaven; she is, through her intercessions for sinners, the "sely yate" or blessed gate. This is a conventional concept of Mary but it stresses that she is woman, she is vessel, she is an entryway, a vagina through which she not only brought forth the Christ child but through which Man may enter heaven. The same image is found in "O gloriosa domina excelsa:"

Lady blissful, with great might,  
Higher than the star's light,  
God made you of all women best  
And Him you nourished at your breast.  
Eve it was who brought sin to man  
Yet you have cured it through your son.  
You are in heaven a holy virgin  
lass  
Through whom the sinful may gladly  
pass;  
You are called the gate of the king  
bright,  
And brighter you are than any light.  
Glad we are you life us brought,  
And that Christ's death our souls  
has bought.<sup>3</sup>

This poet again stresses Mary's motherhood, her suckling the Christ-child, and sees her reversing the sin which Eve gave to mankind. She is a holy maid in heaven, through whom sinners may pass as if through the gateway to the kingdom of heaven. Here the blessed gate has become the gate of the king. This vaginal image, however unconscious, is more elaborate. Eve, through seducing Adam, is supposed to have introduced sin into

the world. Mary, through introducing Christ into the world, not only reverses Eve's action but also forms a passageway back to a holy state. The concept of vagina dominates the image. The Virgin Mary becomes the most exalted of the refined lovers because of the lyricist's obsession with her vaginal inaccessibility (which is ambiguously reversed to accessibility after death).

The love lyric "A Song of Love to the Blessed Virgin" presents an even more obvious variation of the theme:

A yearning love has come to me  
To serve my lady, the queen of  
bliss,  
More and more in my degree  
As long as I might live. 4

While Mary here is still "blessed" she is contemplated in human terms as a lover; she is the lady whom the poet will serve as a loyal knight should, in hopes that someday he may be rewarded.

The Courtly Love tradition, of course, emphasized that the knight's worship of his earthly lady should be akin to the religious worshipping of a goddess.<sup>5</sup> Thus, when the refined lover becomes more accessible than the Virgin Mary, she is above the suitor in rank, still worshipped from afar, still capable of largesse. Now she is the lady of the courtly love tradition who is worshipped by one of her lord's knights and who may, without sin, become sexually accessible. Thus did Cryseide in



The Inamorata from an engraving  
by Callot

Chaucer's poem Troilus and Cryseide:

If, in such circumstances, she yields, she commits no sin against the social code of her age and country: she commits no unpardonable sin against any code I know of--unless, perhaps against that of the Hindus. By Christian standards, forgivable: by the rules of courtly love, needing no forgiveness" this is all that need be said of Cryseide's granting the Rose to Troilus.<sup>6</sup>

Below the courtly lady in rank on this scale of refined types of lovers, the damsel in distress is, out of gratitude, usually accessible. In such cases the obstacles between the male and his lover are not her scruples about their relationship but dragons, giants or other knights. At the end of this scale of lovers the more popular image of the genteel lover emerges to dominate much literature. She is accessible, attractive, noble by birth, intellectually stimulating at the right times as, for example, Viola in Twelfth Night or Beatrice in Much Ado about Nothing; she is Rosalind in As You Like It, who is "gentle" like her father, the banished Duke, and who is praised "for her virtues."<sup>7</sup> She has wit, beauty and a lover who, despite his lame verse, adores her appropriately:

But upon the fairest boughs,  
Or at every sentence end,  
Will I "Rosalinda" write,  
Teaching all that read to know  
The quintessence of every sprite

Heaven would in little show.<sup>8</sup>

The difference between the refined lover and our second category of unrefined lovers drawn from the types of servant girls in the commedia dell'arte has been explored in Kate Millett's analysis of Victorian sex imagery.<sup>9</sup> The "Lillies" whom she calls "high-born maidens full of sensibility and melting with sexual frustration" are our refined lovers.<sup>10</sup> However, as these refined lovers are seen through male eyes, their high-birth and sensibility will be the most obvious characteristic presented to the reader. Their sexual frustration, which Kate Millett perceives by accurately reading between the lines, is more readily observed in characters found in works written by women. It is especially obvious, though unconsciously portrayed, in the works of many women novelists of the nineteenth century. Lady Eastlake's criticism of Jane Eyre as an unchristian work, as being born from the spirit of the anti-christ, is not only due to her resentment of those upstart governesses who wish to marry rich eligible bachelors and thereby to shake the foundations of her society; it is also a result of her perception that Jane is sexually provocative, albeit naively so.<sup>11</sup> It is not difficult to attribute Jane's behaviour to her sexual frustrations and to those of her creator who was blind to this quality in her heroine.

On the other hand, Kate Millett's Roses,

"the sensual opposites" of Lilies,<sup>12</sup> are more harmful than our unrefined lovers, the fresh and frolicsome maids who form the second category of types of women in the framework drawn from the commedia dell'arte. Roses are destructive; "a vaginal trap" is Millett's term for Arabella in Hardy's Jude the Obscure. The unrefined lover is in an invidious position; she may seem too accessible to men and therefore is suspected by them of infidelity with other men. On the other hand, she is too independent to be an inamorata; the unrefined lover is the property of no one man.

At her most exalted the unrefined lover is a coquette (sometimes soubrette) similar in character to Belinda in Alexander Pope's The Rape of the Lock:

On her white Breast a sparkling Cross  
she wore,  
Which Jews might kiss, and Infidels  
adore.  
Her lively Looks a sprightly Mind  
disclose,  
Quick as her Eyes, and as unfix'd  
as those:  
Favours to none, to all she Smiles  
extends,  
Oft she rejects, but never once  
offends. 13

She can be the innocent yet provocative ingenue whom we find as Sylvia in Marivaux's Arlequin Poli Par L'Amour. A late outcropping of the commedia dell'arte in eighteenth-century France, she is constantly provoking Harlequin with her sexuality while she maintains an



Columbines

innocent appearance. The provocation of the coquette is, unlike that of Jane Eyre, not due to naivety and sexual frustration but is consciously manipulated sensuality.

Turning from the coquette and related types of unrefined lovers to the most accessible unrefined lover, we find, of course, the prostitute. From Plautus to Ben Jonson the courtesan is a recognized role in comedy. With her on the last rung of the ladder is the less comic (consciously anyway) fallen woman of the Pre-Raphaelites, Mary Magdalen. Yet however degraded this figure may become, she is not a hostile figure in male eyes. She is a helper and not a destroyer.

Destructiveness is the hallmark of the third category of character-types drawn from the framework of the commedia dell'arte. Let us call her the witch-bitch-shrew figure who "eats men like air."<sup>14</sup> The shrew emerges in the commedia dell'arte in the behaviour of the inamorata when she is aroused by anger. Later, though, in l'Amanto Interessato, Clarice illustrates that wealth encourages the asperity of the shrew.<sup>15</sup> This is interesting because it illustrates how the woman with wealth, as well as with position, becomes a hostile figure in male eyes. This figure becomes inaccessible, not because she is divinely blessed, but because she is free to choose whether or not to become available to a man. She has power over men, not vice versa; she has "maistrye." Such a woman is seen as destructive.

The witch-bitch-shrew is a threatening figure. The witch is inaccessible and tries to render other women likewise by coming between a man and his sexual satisfaction. This situation occurs in many folktales and romances as well as in literature in general: Mozart's The Magic Flute is one case in point; Sleeping Beauty and Snow White are others. Later in Dickens' Great Expectations we find that Stella is Miss Havisham's means of destroying love, Miss Havisham being a subtle witch.

Following the figure of the witch closely, because of her unearthliness,

is the daemon lover. She may be accessible but she destroys her mate; she betrays him; she leaves him "alone and palely loitering" unable to love again. The power of this figure may cause her to seem other-worldly to a male author yet it is her sexuality which is the source of her strength and which renders him helpless. She represents another type of the vaginal trap.

At her most debased the witch-bitch-shrew becomes the pantomime dame, the ugly sister. Sometimes she can be amusing like Lady Jane in W.S.Gilbert's libretto of Patience, but more often she is threatening to come between the hero and his lover as Katisha does in



Joseph Grimaldi's costume for Queen Rondabellyana in the opening of Harlequin and the Red Dwarf (1812)

The Mikado. Beside such a figure a man appears to be an insignificant clown like Ko-Ko who, to protect himself from her destruction of him, must put himself in her power through marriage. The question of the accessibility of this figure is answered by the mid-nineteenth century pantomime tradition of a male impersonating the dame.

This last category in the framework of character-types is of particular interest. The witch-bitch-shrew is frightening when the reasons for her existence are examined. Any threat of wealth, sex or will power which may challenge male desires and which may require their alteration is immediately classed as evil, as emanating from the behaviour typical of the witch, bitch or shrew. This character-type in literature becomes feared, shunned and destroyed. It is rare for these women to arrive at anything but a disastrous end.

Within the framework of the three basic types of women--the refined lover, the unrefined lover and the witch-bitch-shrew--we can see gradations of female character-types whose one common aspect is vaginal accessibility. More recently, James Joyce in Ulysses exalts vaginal accessibility beyond all categories of our typology to become the force of creation, the fecund female sea and the bedridden (but not invalid) Molly Bloom. It becomes degraded by

modern advertizing to "Use my Miami Gateway to America's Sunshine States . . . . I can fly you in wide-bodied comfort." Surely this is the modern equivalent of gladly passing through the blessed gate to Paradise.

Women authors are now emerging and creating new images of themselves. They will, we hope, come to terms with the images of women which have been typed in literature to fit a man-made scale of vaginal accessibility. It will be interesting to see what impact their new images of women will have on male authors.

#### NOTES

1. These plays (in which these figures of women are found) have been translated by Harry Salerno in Scenarios of the Commedia dell'Arte: Flaminio Scala's Il Teatro delle favole rappresentative (New York, 1967). The female characters are also described in detail in Pierre Louis Duchartre's The Italian Comedy, translated by Randolph Weaver (New York, 1966).
2. The original lyrics are to be found in Carleton Brown, Religious Lyrics of the Fourteenth Century (Oxford, 1952). I have translated them here. The original of "Ave Maris Stella" is to be found on p. 55.
3. Ibid., p. 53.
4. Ibid., p. 178.
5. C.S. Lewis, The Allegory of Love (Oxford, 1936), p. 2.
6. Ibid., p. 183.
7. William Shakespeare, As You Like It (New Haven, 1919), p. 17.
8. Ibid., p. 50.
9. Kate Millett, Sexual Politics (London, 1971), p. 148.
10. Ibid.
11. Lady Eastlake, "Jane Eyre and Vanity Fair," Quarterly Review, 1848, pp. 173-174.
12. Millett, Sexual Politics, p. 149.
13. Alexander Pope, The Rape of the Lock ed., Cenffrev Tillotson (London, 1940), pp. 159-160.
14. Sylvia Plath, "Lady Lazarus," in Ariel (London, 1965).
15. K.M. Lea, Italian Popular Comedy (Oxford, 1934), p. 119. It is likewise interesting that Katharine in Shakespeare's The Taming of the Shrew is likewise wealthier than her lover and husband Petruchio.